

If I Should Die Before I Wake

Stacey Slaten

"How come cats have whiskers?"

"Because they need them. Which PJ's do you want—the duckies or the sheep?"

"The sheep."

Christy's mother closed the drawer and walked to the bed. She gently untangled Christy's hair with a wide-toothed comb, then helped her undress.

"How come your eye looks funny?"

"I fell down. Put your foot through here," her mother replied, patiently guiding Christy's leg through the material.

"How come Daddy's not here?"

"He had to work. Do you want to sleep with Mr. Bear or Kitty?"

Christy chose Mr. Bear as her mother turned back the covers on her bed. They peeked under the bed to find hidden monsters, but none were discovered.

"How come we pray?"

"Because God takes care of us—especially sweet, little girls like you."

Christy's mother turned on the night-light before switching off the big light. Christy knelt, hands clasped tightly.

"Now I lay me down to sleep." She chanted the familiar prayer with a childish lilt.

"I pray dear Lord my soul you'll keep." Christy peered at her mother briefly and, receiving an encouraging nod, continued.

"If I should die before I wake—" Headlights danced eerily across the room as a car pulled into the driveway. A car door slammed, and the crunch of gravel echoed through the open window.

"I pray dear Lord my soul you'll take." Christy's prayer trailed into a whisper. The soft scrape of the front door opening floated up the stairs. Then, a crash reverberated

through the house, followed by a slurred curse.

"...and bless Mommy. Amen." Christy crept into bed and pulled the covers to her chin. Her mother lingered a moment, then leaned to kiss her goodnight.

"Sweet dreams, Baby."

She walked to the door and started to shut it behind her.

"Mommy? I forgot to bless Daddy!"

A peculiar look crossed her mother's face before she soothed, "That's okay, Darling."

A moment later she stood, poised at the top of the staircase. As she descended, she murmured her own silent prayer. Then, she touched the cold steel in her pocket for reassurance.